New Fiction in Varied Forms

ADRIENNE TONER. By Anne Douglas Sedgwick. Houghton, Mifflin Company.

MISS SEDGWICK has given us in "Adrienne Toner" an extraordinary book. She has, to my mind, exceeded in the skill and insight with which she has portrayed her heroine even the remarkable performance achieved by her "Tante." "Tante" was a simple problem by the side of "Adrienne," for one thing, and Miss Sedgwick is a writer who grows with each book. Her style is more flexible, richer without the slightest loss of clarity, and her still, contained humor riper than ever before.

First and most decidedly, she has a story to tell. There is suspense in her narrative, a high dramatic quality to the clash of characters and the events precipitated by this clash. You are conscious of your interest, it grows tense, and your emotions are so strongly engaged that it is difficult to lay the volume aside. Difficult because of the sheer reality of these lives whose development is revealed with so subtle a sympathy, so surprising an understanding. The breath of life emanates from the pages, and it is intoxicating to breathe it. Then there is the compelling figure of Adrienne. Here is, indeed, an original character; a woman curiously ordinary, "desperately usual," as one of her acquaintances expresses it, yet amazing. Capable of the tremendous. A creature wrapped up in conceit, deadly sure of herself, a dangerous egoist because of her conviction that she is unalterably right, yet one who can be utterly selfless and whose passion is the desire to bring happiness, to do good. Life can make strange play with such a being. And life exerts itself in this story, where, before it is over, every phase of Adrienne is shown, and all the possibilities of her nature find fulfillment. We see her through many eyes, even through her own. And if at the beginning we could not understand how Barney fell in love, at the end we comprehend easily enough Oldmeadow's amazing devotion.

But who is Adrienne, and what is this story of hers?

Like most of Miss Sedgwick's books, the scene is England. The comfortable, well-bred, delightful England of people who do not perhaps have much money, but who have distinguished profiles, easy manners, country homes, London interests and whose lives are rich in culture and healthy with exercise in the open. The England that was before the war, and which, in spite of all the dark prognostications, still exists, even if in a modified form. The book begins in 1913, very early in the spring. It closes with the ending of the war. But the war does not enter to any particular degree. It is swept up in a few paragraphs, with its havocs and simplifications. The drama has been brought to its climax before the war touches more than lightly the lives of the persons who have made it. It is only the last act that the four dreadful years affect—but though this act does not change to any important degree the situation developed in the two first, it completes Adrienne.

Adrienne is an American. She comes, as much as anywhere, from California, though the fortune she inherited was made in Chicago, and her mother's people lived in Maine, in a small farmhouse. The father had died early. The mother and daughter, with plenty of money and plenty of high aspirations, wandered over the world. The mother was one of the most soulful of any of the many soulful women American has produced. "She dressed in the Empire period: Queen Louise of Prussia, white gauze bound beneath her chin. She had a harp and warbled to monarchs. She had an astral body and a Yogi and a yacht. . . ." and when her time came to die she got her daughter to put her on the yacht and sail her out into the Pacific, where she died, in the sunlight, holding her Adrienne's hand and smiling. And Adrienne has the power of healing. She lays her hands on suffering heads and pain vanishes and fever is stilled.

Adrienne believed in goodness. She acknowledged no other religion. But she believed that goodness was everywhere. That you had only to follow your light. And she most determinedly followed hers. Nothing real in life had ever touched her. She had lived in the world of make believe emotions, convictions and enthusiasms, which was her mother's and which she had made her own. She believed in this world and in herself as a part of it so consumedly that it gave her a force, a power. She had the faith which moves mountains.

It is through Oldmeadow's eyes that we study her most keenly. Barney has fallen at her feet, Barney's family follow him in charmed devotion to this new, this wonderful girl, so different from anything ever met before. But Oldmeadow, the boyhood friend of Barney, though somewhat older, almost regarded as the elder son of the family, himself an orphan and a lonely man, it is Oldmeadow who remains outside the circle of her influence, who weighs her, measures her, estimates her—and dreads her. "She will spoil things," he thinks. For she changes things, changes people, goes her way with the persistence of the blind, understands nothing but the patter of her faith, can see one side only, and that in a bright white light.

This is her appearance. Oldmeadow has come down for the week end to his friends' house in the Cotwolds, where Miss Toner too is staying. She is not yet promised to Barney, but the indications point all one way. He meets her at the tea table:

"Miss Toner's was an insignificant little head, if indeed it could be called little, since it was too large for her body, and her way of dressing her hair in wide braids, pinned round it and projecting over her ears, added to the top-heavy effect. The hair was her only indubitable beauty, fine and fair and sparkling like the palest, purest metal. It was cut in a light fringe across a projecting forehead, and her mouth and chin projected too. So that, as he termed it to himself, it was a squashed in face, ugly in structure, the small nose, from its depressed bridge, jutting forward in profile; the lips, in profile, flat yet prominent. Nevertheless, he owned, studying her over his teacup, the features, ugly, even trivial in detail, had in their assemblage something of unexpected force. Her tranquil smile had potency, and he suddenly became aware of her flat, gentle voice, infrequent, yet oddly dominating . . . he saw it as a bland blue ribbon rolled out among broken counters of color . . . all the other voices went up and down; all the others half said things and let them drop or trail. She said things to the end. . . ."

And what she says are platitudes. She says the obvious thing, she makes the obvious quotation, she trots out the proper enthusiasms. The world is for her the inside of a guide book. She tries to feel the proper thrill in the right places. Not with any effort, however. It is natural to her.

Already she is beginning to turn things upside down at the Chadwicks. She is planning a motor trip in Switzerland for Mrs. Chadwick, who has not been away from home for fourteen years and more, and who has not thought anything about it till now, when Adrienne makes her see that perhaps she is a little tired and bored with the home duties and monotony. She brings a sense of adventure and movement. To Palgrave, the younger son, a lad of 18, she brings visions. "Danger and venture and conquest, and then resting, on the heights, while one hears the bells beneath one. . . . It's life, isn't it? The pulse of life." So she talks to him, and Palgrave says that it is.

Oldmeadow and Nancy talk her over later. Nancy loves Barney, has loved him since she was a child, and he was on the point of loving her when Adrienne came. Nancy is sweet and fine. She bears Adrienne no grudge, but she fears for Barney.

"Because she's so very strong. And she's so different. Everything in her is different. She has nothing—nothing with us, or we with her . . . and she'll want such different things. . . . There is something portentious about her. . . ."

Be that as it may, Barney marries her. And presently things begin to happen.

Brought up as she was, being what she is, Adrienne is doomed. She loves her husband, but she can only see one way, and she must act according to her view. Disaster is certain.

The form of the disaster and its consequences, and what supervenes upon them, are related with an effect of inevitability. We come to understand Adrienne completely, and we come to love her. In one sense she is lost. In another she reaches a safety and a happiness that are, more than anything else, directly hers. She is capable of learning from life, one of the greatest and rarest of gifts, and she learns all that is to be learnt.

It is not often that a novel of so fine a beauty is written. It has depth and tenderness, and it presents life as something worth living, experience as something worth meeting. It is at the furthest possible remove from the sentimental, the sweet, the glad book, and is worth a million of these in its sane and sound optimism.

HILDEGARDE HAWTHORNE.

ABBE PIERRE. By Jay William Hudson. D. Appleton & Co.

TO offer a thick volume of prose idyls to the American public may be flattering to the popular taste, but it is a bold experiment. The form is a difficult one in itself, and has never been acclimatized here. It is dangerous, in that it is so easy to slip downward into sentimentality; tenuous vaporings that disintegrate like a thin fog before a puff of wind if one turns even a whiff of criticism upon them. Vox et practerea nihil. Even that is justifiable if the voice be musical enough, but the appreciative audience remains small. But Prof. Hudson has surmounted the inherent difficulties of the unusual task he set himself so well that one may at least hope for a welcome from a considerable public. There is no doubt that the critics will acclaim him, and that he is sure of a succes d'estime and full recognition by the discerning few.

For the charm of the book is very real. Prof. Hudson—he holds a professorship of philosophy in the University of Missouri—has a delicate insight, a warmly human, sympathetic appreciation of that which is noble and beautiful in the simple and childlike life of the people he is portraying. His old Abbe is a "creation," an exquisite small genre painting, very highly finished and beautifully conceived. Many of the other portraits in the book stand out with clarity and fineness of outline, and the background of the whole thing is just what it should be. Prof. Hudson does not slop over; it is pure sentiment, but never sentimentality.

It is, however, a little misleading to call it, as the subtitle does, a "novel of to-day." In any careful use of the term it is not a novel at all, but a series of more or less connected sketches, with the Abbe as the central figure, dealing with life and landscape in Gascony as it is in this after the war epoch—although the war note sounds but faintly. Each sketch is a complete idyl in itself—some of them almost perfect specimens—and the connective tissue of narrative is very thin. In fact, the intrusion of the wandering American is not altogether happy. Somehow, he doesn't belong. He is a pleasant person in himself, and it is plausible enough for him to wander in, but he is nevertheless an intrusion. His slight love story is always just a bit out of the picture. If we must take it seriously one is apt to be a little sorry for Germaine, the beautiful country girl who marries this errant American, for she is bound to have a hard time of it when he takes her home to his college town in the "Department of Ohio." We should have preferred, if he had to be there at all, to have the American permanently transplanted to France, where he might get on very well, writing minor verse and perhaps cultivating the neglected vineyards of his wife's deceased father. To move such a girl, half peasant and wholly Gascon, to the aridity and rancorous hardness of an Ohio town is little short of cruelty.

But, with that small complaint off our mind, there is little left to say that is not wholly admiring. It is a book that one will dip into again and again—a bedside book to place among the very few that one may count upon for something good, for the reconciliation of a tired or troubled mind which needs to be once more told that there are beauty and faith and love and hope somewhere in the world. It is a "healing" book; not merely a sedative, but genuinely enlightening, comfortingly warm.

The old Abbe Pierre is writing down his observations of his native village, to which he has returned after forty years of teaching in Paris and London. He boasts that he is not provincial—not he, for has he not even taken a priest's place in London, where he perfected his English?—but he is thoroughly Gascon, and his view of life is always that of the village: wise, enlightened, understanding the eternal elements in human nature but always seeing them in their Gascon environment. It would not do to take the picture out of its frame; the frame is a part of the whole.

"So this is our village," he writes, "so shut away from the great world that it is a world all its own. Is it any wonder that I love its peace? In coming here one does not feel so much that he has come to a different part of our earth as that he has left it behind him. . . . So it is, the Middle Ages are still here, peacefully decaying, yet very alive in good, old fashioned ways. For us who live here, even such universal things as dawns and sunsets and moons and stars take on a local character and seem to belong to us alone."

Of the inhabitants in this untroubled corner of the old world M. l'Abbe tells us:

"Our Gascon people have a sense of dignity and independence, which comes of their living the lives they live, each on his own little plot of land, which he works with his own hands, getting his daily bread as the proud creation of his own will and effort. Yes, that sort of life gives a dignity to a man, crude as it may be, which it is difficult to deprive him of! And I suppose this dignity makes us self-conscious, even in our pleasures, and very sensitive to ridicule. One may call this sense of dignity a sort of vanity if one pleases; there probably is some vanity in us Gascons."

Probably—when one recalls Cyrano de Bergerac, D'Artagnan, even Henry IV., and Monsieur is well inspired to quote Napoleon's alleged remark—"Give me an army of true Gascons and I shall be able to charge through a hundred leagues of flame!"

But the gasconade is not much in evidence in the worthy Abbe's meditations. He is more concerned to

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